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AUTHOR Lester, Virda K.; Brogdon, Richard E.
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ABSTRACT

Information on reading and study skills programs in four-year traditionally black institutions was collected. A 20-item questionnaire administered to 66 institutional representatives elicited information concerning: the status of current reading and study skills programs from an organizational viewpont; the emphasis placed upon student testing and uses made of test results; the techniques used for teaching reading and study skills; the materials and equipment that are used in these programs; and the chief difficulties experienced in obtaining student participation and campuswide faculty cooperation. Seven programs were selected for in-depth study: individual profiles were developed from the survey responses and from interviews. Findings include the following: although a few reading and study skills programs in the traditionally black institutions were started before 1970, the majority began between 1970 and 1983; provisions were usually made for students to acquire basic and developmental reading skills; the design of reading and study skills programs were most often the responsibility of English departments; in contrast, the departments of basic/developmental studies have conducted their own programs; and instructional features appear to be similar among institutional reading and study skills programs. (SW)

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READING AND STUDY SKILLS PROGRAMS IN FOUR-YEAR TRADITIONALLY BLACK INSTITUTIONS NATIONWIDE

Virda K. Lester, Tuskegee Institute

and

Richard E. Brogdon, Auburn University

Descriptive Study

Presented at the

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally black institutions have for a long time realized that their students have a definite need for reading assistance. This condition is caused by many factors; among them are directed open-door admissions policies--requiring one of several standardized achievement tests, but not strictly enforcing a cutoff score (Blake, 1980)--and low scores on the verbal section of college entrance examinations (Leedy, 1959). Therefore, the establishment of reading and study skills programs at black institutions is an attempt to assist high risk students (students who are likely to fail or drop out of college) in obtaining skills essential for academic success.

Research has shown that students may benefit from reading and study skills programs. Maxwell (1971) observed that gaining the ability to organize and structure ideas would make students potentially more successful. Mouly (1952) also observed that "a remedial reading program can result in improved academic grades for those students who take the course seriously" (p. 466). Further, Ritter (1971) remarked that "students responded favorably to a study skills program and noted that students improved in grade point average because of newly acquired skills" (p. 379). Therefore, this study was designed to learn about practices in reading and study skills programs in traditionally black four-year institutions of higher education.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Several studies of reading and study skills programs have been conducted by researchers interested in the status of post secondary reading programs. These researchers designed questionnaires to help them describe such programs. In 1956, Causey and Eller completed a questionnaire study involving 418 colleges and universities, and in 1969-70, Lowe and Stefurak completed a status study of the College Reading Improvement Programs of Georgia. Each reseacher was interested primarily in extracting information about teaching techniques, materials, equipment, tests, and other data that would specify how reading programs operated. Noticeably absent from the review of the literature, however, were recent studies addressing specifically the status of reading and study skills programs in traditionally black institutions. Instead, the studies simply described the status of reading and study skills program nationwide. This study provided information which will enable personnel associated with reading and study skills programs in traditionally black institutions to place their programs in perspective as they compare their current practices with those of others.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to determine the status of reading and study skills programs in four-year traditionally black institutions nationwide and to analyze selected components of these programs.

A 20 item response questionnaire was designed to elicit information such as: (a) the status of current reading and study skills programs from an organizational viewpoint, (b) the emphasis placed upon student testing and uses made of test results, (c) the techniques used for teaching reading and study skills, (d) the materials and equipment which are used in reading and study skills programs, and (e) the chief difficulties experienced in obtaining student participation and campus-wide faculty cooperation. The questionnaire was mailed to 82 individuals who were knowledgeable about reading and study skills programs at institutions where they were employed. Of that number, 66 were returned. Questions one through five were based on responses from the 66 respondents. However, since six respondents answered NO to questions four or five, they were not required to complete subsequent items on the questionnaire. Therefore, data were supplied by 60 respondents for questions six through 20 about the organization, as well as specific learning and teaching activities in reading and study skills programs.

Seven programs were selected for in-depth study. Individual profiles were developed from the survey responses and from interviews held with persons who had complete knowledge about their reading and study skills programs.

The descriptive nature of this study led to frequency and percentage information as well as individual institutional profiles.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Findings of this research indicated that reading and study skills programs were generally similar to reading programs reported by Causey (1955), Lowe (1968), and Lowe and Stefurak (1970). Reading programs varied with regard to types of personnel conducting such programs, selection of participants, printed materials and instruments used, testing and evaluating procedures employed, length of programs, bases for referrals, extent of individualization, and reading skills stressed. The study revealed that most of the traditionally black institutions had enrollments between 1,500 and 4,999 students. Many required one of several standardized achievement tests, and approximately one-third enforced a strict cutoff score for student admission. According to Lowe and Stefurak (1970), the administration, staff, and teaching personnel of institutions of higher learning showed an interest in student welfare by establishing reading improvement programs in 1966 or later. Similarly, it was found that students who were admitted to traditionally black institutions had a definite need for reading assistance, and the majority developed special basic or developmental programs which began between 1970 and 1983. The title

and description of courses varied in Causey's (1975) study, as they did in this study. According to the respondents of the current study, courses were classified as basic and/or developmental. Most of the reading and study skills programs were described as (a) basic or developmental studies class(es), and (b) reading laboratories. The design and management of the programs were most often the responsibility of the departments of English, basic/developmental studies, or education. Lowe (1968) and Lowe and Stefurak (1970) indicated similar findings in their research.

Many students who were admitted to traditionally black institutions were required to participate in reading and study skills programs. Students were placed in these programs primarily on the basis of scores made on placement tests. Research has shown that many colleges and universities administer some type of placement test to incoming freshmen to assess their reading proficiency. Ahrendt (1975) advised the use of a variety of reading measures, and a representative list was indicated in a study by Mavrogenes, Winkley, Hanson, and Vacca (1974). Cross (1976) found that over 80 percent of the programs she surveyed utilized some sort of standardized test to place students in basic and/or developmental courses. Roueche and Snow found similar results in their survey of developmental programs (1977). The majority of programs in the current study used the results of The Nelson-Denny Reading Test for placement as well as for diagnosis, evaluation, and referral to other school services. Typically, one reading course was required of students, but some were required to take more than one

course. Similar findings were reported by Sweiger (1971), Evans and Dubois (1972), Tillman (1973), Koenke (1975), Hammond (1976), and Cooper (1983).

The review of related literature revealed similar instructional features among institutional programs. Likewise, instructional features among reading and study skills programs in traditionally black institutions tended to be similar. Most of the programs employed as many as three full-time instructors and one part-time instructor to teach reading courses. The faculty members often held master's and doctoral degrees in reading. The size of the largest class ranged from 15 to 29 students, while the smallest was between 10 and 19. Although most of the programs allowed students the option of unlimited repetitions, the majority of the students successfully completed the course(s) on the first attempt. Once the courses were successfully completed by the students, the majority of the programs offered at least one hour of credit toward graduation.

Findings of this research tended to be in agreement with the review of related literature that no research to date has conclusively shown any single technique to be clearly superior to others in improving comprehension. Techniques for teaching reading courses varied from program to program and instructor to instructor. However, the majority of instructors who teach reading and study skills courses at traditionally black institutions practiced the technique of always informing their students about test results as well as reading problems. Additionally, since evaluation was continuous and the needs

of students were different, a variety of techniques was used throughout the duration of the reading class(es).

It was reported in the review of related literature that a variety of materials and equipment was used for teaching reading and study skills. To meet course objectives, a variety of materials and equipment was used in conjunction with a variety of techniques in reading and study skills programs at traditionally black institutions. Workbooks and textbooks were used more in reading and study skills programs than other materials, followed by mimeographed or xeroxed materials and paperback books. Machines such as reading pacers, controlled readers, and tachistoscopes were used but not to the same extent as the aforementioned materials. Computers and computer-assisted programs were seldom used.

Some of the respondents indicated that no difficulties were experienced in obtaining student participation and campus-wide faculty cooperation; however, some experienced difficulties because (a) no credit was awarded for the courses, (b) students lacked enough time to take the courses, (c) a faculty advisement system was lacking, (d) a stigma was attached to the program as well as to the courses, (e) content faculty were not knowledgeable about the program and its benefits, and (f) no interest or concern was shown by students and faculty.

PROFILE FINDINGS

With regard to large and small institutions as defined in this research, four large institutions had student enrollments between 2,000

and 4,100; and three small institutions had enrollments between 500 and 1,300. Five of the institutions required one of several standardized achievement tests for admission to their college/university; however, only two of the five enforced a strict cutoff score. All of the institutions realized that many students who were admitted to their college/university needed assistance in basic skills, and each offered a basic or developmental studies program. Of the seven programs, five were started between 1970 and 1983 and two before 1970.

Four interviewees described their programs as reading laboratories and basic or developmental studies class(es); two as reading laboratories only; and one as a resource center and a basic/developmental studies class. The majority of the reading and study skills programs were conducted by basic/developmental studies departments. To finance their programs, funds were available through private grants, federal and state revenues. The aims of the reading and study skills programs were (a) to help students acquire prerequisite skills which are necessary for academic success, (b) to increase the reading efficiency of students who were enrolled in the program, (c) to help students acquire self-confidence and competence in basic skills, and (d) to identify students' strengths and weaknesses, advise and counsel them properly, and monitor their progress.

All of the reading and study skills programs utilized some form of testing for student placement. Two used the scores from The Nelson-Denny Reading Test; two used the Scholastic Aptitude Test; and three used either the Comparative Guidance Test, the

California Achievement Test: Reading, or the Stanford Test of Academic Skills. Performance on placement tests indicated that most students were required to enroll in the reading and study skills courses. The interviewees preferred required student participation because, if the courses were not required, many students would not participate. The size of the largest reading and study skills class was between 17 and 50 students and the smallest class size was between nine and 15 students. The interviewees' preference of an ideal class size was a maximum of 15 students.

Most of the programs permitted students the option of unlimited course repetition. Three interviewees reported that between 80 and 100 percent of their students successfully complete the courses on the first attempt; one indicated a 60 to 79 percent successful completion rate; and three reported that less than 50 percent successfully complete the courses on the first attempt. Grades of A, B, and C were awarded in four of the programs; two used the traditional grading system, A, B, C, D and F; and one used the grading system, A, B, C, D and E (failure). A minimum of one course was offered by all seven programs and most awarded one hour of credit toward graduation. Most of the courses were generally taught by full time faculty members with master's and doctoral degrees in reading.

The interviewees indicated that a common syllabus was utilized to ensure uniformity of course work. To implement course objectives, instructors used a variety of techniques or methods. The materials which were used most often were workbooks and textbooks, mimeographed

or xeroxed materials, paperback books, interest inventories, and self-correcting and programmed instruction. Although machines were usually available, they were not used to the same extent which the aforementioned materials were used.

No major difficulties were experienced in obtaining student participation and campus-wide faculty cooperation. To help similar programs achieve a better working relationship, a primary suggestion was offered by the interviewees: obtain college/university-wide commitment, support, and cooperation from students, faculty, staff, and top level administrators.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Although a few reading and study skills programs in the traditionally black institutions were started before 1970, the majority began between 1970 and 1983. Since traditionally black insititutions admit students who have reading deficiencies, provisions will probably be made for students to acquire basic and developmental reading skills that are necessary for academic success.

2. Reading and study skills programs were designed and managed by various academic units. The design of reading and study skills programs has most often been the responsibility of the departments of English. By contrast, the departments of basic/developmental studies have conducted their own programs. However, the design and management of reading and study skills programs will probably remain unchanged; but college-wide involvement and commitment are expected to increase greatly.

3. Instructional features appeared to be similar among institutional reading and study skills programs. Many utilized the services of full time and part-time instructors with master's and doctoral degrees in reading. However, the number of instructors appeared to have been insufficient when compared to the percentage of students who were required to take the reading and study skills courses.

4. Some form of testing has been necessary for placing students in reading and study skills courses. The majority of the respondents indicated that they have used the results of The Nelson-Denny Reading Test for placement, diagnosis, evaluation, and referral to other school services. The use of this test is likely to continue.

5. According to the respondents, a variety of techniques was utilized in the reading and study skills programs at the traditionally black institutions. Instructors talked with students about test results and reading problems. To help students acquire a better understanding of reading skills, instructors gave demonstrations on how to apply the skills. Instructors encouraged students to bring texts from other courses to learn how to use them efficiently. Variations in teaching styles are likely to continue.

6. Although machines such as reading pacers, controlled readers, and tachistoscopes were used in the reading and study skills programs, they were not utilized to the same extent as were workbooks/textbooks, mimeographed or xeroxed materials and paperback books. It appeared that these programs were utilizing a book-centered approach.

7. Difficulties were experienced by some respondents in obtaining student participation and campus-wide faculty cooperation. The difficulties were experienced because no credit or not enough credit toward graduation was awarded, content faculty were not knowledgeable about the program and its benefits, and a stigma was attached to the courses and to the reading and study skills program itself. Until the importance of these programs is recognized, difficulties will probably continue to be experienced.

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